Mind Games

Goodfellow students put predicting the future to the test in Lone Star

by Tech. Sgt. Mark Kinkade
photos by Master Sgt. Scott Wagers

Lone Star is an opportunity for intelligence trainees to perform in an operational field environment. Trainees who demonstrate excellence in all phases of the exercise — not only mastery of academic principles but also application of those principles — are awarded the coveted "Lone Star Warrior" coin.

They're playing mind games at Goodfellow Air Force Base, Texas.

A bunch of military instructors — all steeped in years of military intelligence field work — take a bunch of green students, put them in a room draped with maps, crowded with tables and humming with computer equipment, and squeeze their minds. A week later, the students emerge, suddenly very clear on what intelligence analysts, targeting experts and others in the intelligence career fields do.

It may not seem like much, but for students completing the Air Force's intelligence training courses at Goodfellow, the maps, tables, computers and instructors are part of an end-of-course test that pits intellect and training against experience.

A few years ago, instructors reporting for duty at Goodfellow after years in the field cooked up a war game played in the minds of students who will one day make real-world decisions on what, when and how to attack. They called it Lone Star, and it's designed to give students of all ranks a "peripheral vision" of how all sources of information come together to fight a war.

"Intelligence work is, by nature, puzzle-building," said Master Sgt. Brendan Criswell, a Lone Star curriculum instructor. "This helps them get pieces to the puzzle."

Smart guesses

Call it a training ground for the mind. Intelligence work is about making educated guesses and predictions about what will happen in the future. Be it enemy troop movements or the effectiveness of ground burst munitions on a column of tanks, intelligence experts have to give wartime commanders an idea of what might happen.

"Intelligence people make their money by taking information and telling what will happen tomorrow," said Lone Star instructor Tech. Sgt. James Sanders.

Lone Star simulates life in an intelligence center on the leading edge of a future battlefield. Using real-world threat information, weapons analysis and information, the instructors piece together a "worst-case" scenario involving a threat to the United States or its allies.

The threat is real, as are the weapons, the tactics and the philosophies of the countries represented in the classified war game. Maps are carefully guarded so no one outside the classroom sees the projected war zone, and discussion of the specifics of the scenario stops at the classroom door.

In the scenario, students are told to imagine the threat is mushrooming at an alarming rate, perhaps sparked by a small incident or perceived threat. During the course of the war game, the scenario evolves as the enemy reacts to Air Force actions

"Weapons are only as good as the professionals who plant them," Master Sgt. Brendon Criswell told Lone Star students. One course goal is to familiarize students with weapons they may need to direct against enemy forces. "As the weapons of airpower become smarter, so must our students," Criswell said. Lone Star is a simulated wartime battle exercise for intelligence career field students at Goodfellow Air Force Base, Texas.

and vice versa. The threat goes from bad to worse, and students have to shake off their inexperience to give air commanders some idea of what lies beneath the fog of war.

"It was almost like the weight of the world was on my shoulders," said 2nd Lt. Creighton Mullins, a ground fusion analyst.

"Every day I approached it like I was going to war," he said. "I didn't have a clear idea of exactly what the intelligence career field was all about until that week. It was an intense time."

War room

All this happens in the space of a couple of crowded rooms in the main academic building for intelligence training at the base. Behind cypher-locked doors, large maps pinned with various icons

After five days of intense instruction on targeting principles, using reconnaissance sources and aircrew mission briefs, Airman Brianna Olsen (left) and Airman 1st Class Joshua Nichols take cover under desks during a simulated attack threat. The course is a safe place for students to make mistakes — and learn from them.

hang from the walls and loose maps flow over tables. Sharp beams of light from high wattage bulbs shoot down over Plexiglas-covered battlefield maps. Computers whirr and radios chatter from instructors pretending to be the enemy.

When the students show up, they are thrown into a wartime environment with ringing telephones, buzzing intercoms, shrieking sirens and always the constant chatter of people trying to read the tea leaves of a war's future.

It's music to the instructors' ears.

"A quiet command post is a dead command post," said Tech. Sgt. Dan Stein, a Lone Star instructor.

The students are separated into "cells," or collections of specific intelligence operations. Each cell is a piece of the intelligence puzzle. When a commander needs information, analysts define an emerging threat or a targeting order is issued, an "intelligence cycle" begins.

"The basic intelligence cycle is essentially collecting information, putting it together so it makes sense and presenting it," Stein said. "In the class-

room, students see only how they fit in the cycle. Lone Star puts all that together."

All Lone Star instructors have experience in the field, either deployed to combat operations in recent years or as part of an intelligence team operating in Korea or other theaters. When they report for duty at Goodfellow, the other instructors pick their brains for anything that will make Lone Star more realistic.

Instructors treat the students as if they are deployed to a forward location. Meal times are limited, work hours are long and students deal with simulated chemical attacks and other threats.

But communication always proves to be the highest hurdle for the students to clear, Stein said.

"You can get a little lost in your own world," he said. "We want this exercise to demonstrate how important it is that each component work together to get a clear picture of what's going on."

A dose of reality

For the students at the course, Lone Star is an eye-opener.

"As soon as we got to the course, [instructors acting as evaluators] looked at stuff in a broader view," Mullins said. "We were used to spitting out super specific information about the things we were analyzing. I'd never really put it all together before."

For 2nd Lt. Maria Garrison, an intelligence officer headed to Nellis Air Force Base, Nev., Lone Star gave her a chance to practice briefing commanders and putting all the intelligence information in some sort of coherent format.

"My first day, just before I briefed the commander, I thought 'Oh geez, I can't do this,' " she said. "By the end of the exercise, I was not only ready to do my job, but eager. I couldn't wait to get out there and tell people what was going on."

While the scenario is designed to let students learn, it does have built-in consequences, Criswell said. If intelligence fails to identify a threat, for example, the program is designed to use that threat against friendly forces. The impact of mistakes is visible to the students.

"We want them to see what can happen if they don't do their jobs right," he said. "We want them to make mistakes, yes. This is a safe environment to do that. But that doesn't mean the mistakes go unpunished."

Lone Star also gives officers and enlisted people a chance to work together, something they don't do during regular class work. For Airman 1st Class Ben McRae, an analyst for U.S. Strategic Command at Offutt Air Force Base, Neb., it was a chance to see how the "other side" works.

"I had to drop a lot of preconceived notions about what the officers would have to do or how they would interact with me. I learned to work with them, something I hadn't expected — that's for sure," he said.

Like any other training school simulation, Lone Star's goal is to give intelligence professionals a taste of what awaits them at their next base or on their first deployment. So far, the instructors say, it's working.

"We've had a lot of reports back from supervisors in the field," Criswell said. "They say the people who go through Lone Star are much more confident and capable when they are just starting out. If everything goes right in upgrade training, everyone will acquire the skills we focus on, but Lone Star gives them a head start." ✪